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# Continuities and Discontinuities

Morton W. Bloomfield

THE NOTIONS of progress and evolution have made natural in modern scholarship an emphasis on continuities and similarities, even long after these basic notions of the intellectuals of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries had begun to fade as dominating ideas or perhaps paradigms of modern thought. It is not surprising then that the essays in this issue of *NLH* devoted to new paths in medieval scholarship should emphasize discontinuities and differences *within* medieval life, culture, ideas, and art as well as *with* our modern period. Looking at the medieval period from a point of view of differences rather than similarities with our own time satisfies both our desire to see the Middle Ages as different in a good sense from our own time and equally in a deeper sense to imply that the Middle Ages from this point of view is really similar to our time with its clashing ideologies, anomie, and restless seeking for what is at its heart religion or perhaps belief of some sort.

Both these desires enable us to idealize the Middle Ages and to believe that it has something to tell us. In a period of intellectual disorder, it is only natural that similar disjunctions in the past be stressed. When paradigms, to use Thomas Kuhn's term, are changing—and in the humanities unlike the sciences, we have many at one time—we instinctively and consciously reanalyze the past, in this case the medieval past, to see how it too was a period of changing paradigms—from oral to written culture, from paganism to Christianity, from feudalism to mercantile capitalism, from Platonism to Aristotelianism, and so forth—and above all how it established new ones without removing the paradoxes and antitypes which characterize all cultural manifestations.

We seem, then, in our time in scholarship to be leaving the emphasis on genesis, background, and historical continuities for structure, contradictions, and breaks. This movement is by no means confined to our attitudes toward the Middle Ages but embraces such phenomena and subjects as how we distinguish ourselves from our background and fathers both literal and spiritual, with Harold Bloom, rather than how much we are indebted to them; as the revival of interest in Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, and other poets of our time or immediately preceding it as poets of disjuncture; as in

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child development; as in modern anthropology with its rebellion against evolution and influence; and as even in our prose style which emphasizes parataxis with its discontinuities as opposed to hypotaxis<sup>1</sup> which our fathers and grandfathers favored for their novels and serious writing. Even evolution theory now emphasizes mutations and discontinuities.

Although this present issue of *NLH* is not the first example of a serious attempt to look differently at and to ask different questions of the Middle Ages than has been the habit in the past 125 years of medieval scholarship,<sup>2</sup> it is certainly a major attempt to see the period with different eyes and to look again at old "truths" and "established verities" about the period. The similarities to our present life and our present hopes encourage a deep interest in the medieval past and yet do not encourage the study of origins or philology in its strictest sense. Above all, we are deep in an age of theory and do not in medievalist studies wish to spend too much time on the history of Germanic sound changes. The age of positivist scholarship seems to be past.

In this issue of *NLH* we find a serious attempt both to define and to illustrate some new approaches to the medieval period. One of the major figures in this reevaluation and restructuring of medieval studies in the past ten years or so has been Hans Robert Jauss. The present article presents succinctly his major ideas. Most of them demand a long analysis and discussion for which we have no space here. Making use of hermeneutics of the Gadamer type and some of the ideas of Zumthor, Haug, and C. S. Lewis, Jauss argues for the "otherness" or alterity as he calls it of the medieval period but at the same time, as I have suggested above in my general comments, emphasizes the modernity in the alterity of the Middle Ages. Convinced that both the positivistic scholarship of the past 150 years and the idealistic interpretation of the Middle Ages, so dear to the heart of the nineteenth century, have exhausted themselves, Jauss presents approaches which emphasize (1) aesthetic pleasure, (2) the alterity of the period to us, and (3) the model character of medieval texts. While none of these approaches are new, they are presented with a vigor and exemplification that heightens our sense of what they mean.

Jauss seems to have little faith in any form of linguistics, sociology, and phenomenology. With some modifications, however, he does seem to favor, among the new intellectual goodies arrayed for humanists these days, hermeneutics and perhaps the new emphasis on the oral basis of literature. Jauss also seems to be unhappy with too much emphasis on the self-referentiality of poetic language which Jakobson and others find characteristic of poetry.

When Jauss gets down to particulars, he is exciting on animal poetry and genres and to my taste less exciting on allegory, which he defines as the poetry of the invisible. On beast poetry, he is especially interested in finding the beginnings of that emphasis on the individual that is supposed to be characteristic of the Middle Ages from the twelfth century on. On genres, he thinks we should emphasize generic components rather than genres as such and reemphasizes Jolles's famous classification of primitive or root genres.

In all these matters, Jauss as always is intelligent and provocative. Whether we can accept his interpretation as theory is another question. Without at least a sound knowledge of philology, all these attractive notions can lead nowhere. He like most older medievalists was properly trained as a philologist before he went on to his penetrating analyses. I still think this subject must occupy a basic role in medieval study even if we don't have to memorize sound changes from Indo-European down to Old English or Old High German. The early "New Critics" had their historical training before they went off to their "organic" analyses of literary texts. Now the young "new critics," if there are any left, don't know any history and their criticism suffers for it. So, too, I think we must still insist on philology as a basic discipline in medieval studies.

Philology must be defined in broader terms, and it should be looked upon as a propaedeutic subject. One cannot be a literary medievalist unless he knows how to understand and deal with his basic materials: medieval manuscripts. Some students will also want to specialize in these matters. Not everyone is capable of indulging or even desires to indulge in generalizations about the period he is studying. Yet many will go on to do so, but philology cannot be dismissed as useless or unnecessary. It is true, however, that the most exciting work of the future may well be done along some of the lines Jauss lays down. He is himself a scholar who delights in accuracy and knowledge, but he knows that more is needed. Here Jauss is exciting. The Middle Ages is the matrix of the present and is thus easily understandable, but it is also a different world and is thus strange to us. Perhaps it is now time to differentiate it from us (especially as we are now strange to ourselves).

Maria Corti, picking up the Lotman and Uspensky notion of antimodels within societal organization, and the speech of Zółkiewski at the 1973 Milan Conference on Semiotics wherein the notion is developed, applies the notion of model to the period around 1000 when a Trinitarian model created ternary divisions throughout medieval society. Then she moves to Humbert of Romans OP's *De eruditione praedicatorium* written in the early thirteenth century with its notion of

social states (a kind of semiotic cultural structure) with sermons for various classes. Until the twelfth century, Corti points out, women as a special category in these divisions and oppositions are left out. Then they suddenly appear.

Various oppositions flourish in medieval thinking. Corti concludes with the Bakhtin notion of popular tradition as seen in the various dialogues of Marcolf against Solomon which are widely preserved in our period. Here we have lower-class culture strongly supported by Marcolf who cuts down to size Solomon's upper-class culture. An opposition culture puts the dominant culture in its place in an upside-down view of the world.

What we have in Corti's essays is really an invitation to think dialectically, to be aware of oppositions—good advice often made but usually ignored. It is difficult to emphasize antitheses and oppositions, but we really only understand a culture when we are aware of its internal oppositions and contradictions, even if we do not choose the Marxian model to think them in. Corti's article is fresh and perceptive, but like most attempts to deal satisfactorily with opposites tends to ignore exceptions. Corti's strong semiological sense enables her to point again and again to the contradictions between *res* and *signa*. One does not have to be a semiotician to realize this fundamental disparity, but it does help one to be precise about the contradictions. Needless to say, the actual analysis of the various documents is sensitively done.

On a personal or cultural level we have the spirit of contradiction or of negativity which is hidden in the affirmations of individuals or cultures. These must be brought to light if the avowed notions of the past are to be understood. Corti's essay is a notable contribution to the understanding of some of these negations of the Middle Ages. Much more needs to be done here. What can we learn from her? Do we need to be semioticians to do cultural and social analyses? On such levels, unlike literary analyses, I would say that it helps,<sup>3</sup> though is not necessary.

Zumthor, Warning, and Vance give us perceptive studies of particular schools, genres, and a literary work of the Middle Ages—in these cases, the Grands Rhétoriciens of fifteenth-century France, religious drama especially of the German-speaking lands and France, and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Zumthor, father of the revolt against positivism and continuities in medieval studies, is especially fascinated by language. Although he seems to accept the classic Huizinga picture of the fifteenth century as a decline and does not make use of anthropological information about "court poets," he has nevertheless written a brilliant study of the fifteenth-century French-speaking rhétoriciens, by seeing their

movement as a “deconstruction” of language and by emphasizing the notion of carnival and public poetry in their work. His sensitivity and intelligence give the whole paper, although many of the notions are not original with him, a sensitivity and intelligence which delight.

I put the word *deconstruction* above in quotation marks because this is not deconstruction in the Derrida sense but of the signifying element in the linguistic processes. The poets discussed, Zumthor emphasizes, are not rejecting an order but rather questioning the univocal nature of the values of the world.

Although not all medieval critics and scholars will possess Zumthor's acuteness, nonetheless his essay provides a real example of how by emphasizing neglected aspects of society like carnival and by an awareness of the complex nature of language in its referential and self-referential roles, one can open new paths. In his comments on the use of irony in the broad sense as in the macaronic poetry and in the narrower sense of puns, the author raises new kinds of questions. The discontinuities and breaks of the past become new ways of overcoming alienation.

Warning has also written a provocative and stimulating essay. He emphasizes in his discussion of religious drama both the quality of foreignness as a hermeneutical hurdle to overcome and the importance of mutations, breaks, or leaps in the evolution of medieval plays. The remythologization and repaganization of the episodes of *Heilsgeschichte* are the ways he sums up the extraordinary development of medieval drama and castigates, as modern American scholars have been doing recently, a simplistic evolutionary story. He, however, goes further and tries to show, often successfully, how this theory has blinded historians to the new/old mythic elements both in the *Visit to the Sepulchre* theme (a most important element in the rise of drama) and in the Passion story. Whether all will agree with his argument that the medieval dramatic tradition developed in opposition to religious cults or not (and I suspect not), Warning's arguments and argumentation will certainly have to be taken account of by future historians of medieval drama.

Vance's article on *Troilus and Criseyde* is full of insights and brilliancies, but I see both imprecision and clarity in his use of semiotics and speech-act theory. Vance is learned and knows a good deal about both notions, but he confuses levels of discourse in the one and defines speech act so broadly as to be, I think, of little use.

The graphic level can be central to the social order without paying attention to the *signifiant*. Only the *signifié* is relevant. Throughout, the level of meaning and the arbitrary level of the sign are confused. That the Middle Ages was especially sign conscious, no one can deny, but

this hardly excuses claiming that misuse of language is a confusion between signifier and signified instead of a confusion between meanings. If Criseyde says "By Mars" instead of "By Venus," "Mars" still means Mars and "Venus" still means Venus, even if she is wrong.

What the section on speech acts contributes to the central argumentation of the poem, I do not understand. I do not see how it can be established that, as Vance claims, Chaucer had more of a performative linguistic consciousness than any other author or even person, unless Vance is using "performative" in a very special sense. Vance also seems to confuse sentences dealing with or describing action and dialogue with the action or dialogue themselves.

I have my prejudices like everyone else, but I find it difficult to accept Vance's basic assumption about the poem: that it is completely in the *contemptus mundi* tradition. Troilus, Criseyde, Pandarus, and the Chaucer figure are all vicious, ugly, and wicked human beings whom Chaucer the author hates. Vance finds evil everywhere in the most imaginative ways. "Die" refers to sexual orgasms and when Chaucer speaks of Diomedes as "of tonge large," what he finds in that remark is Diomedes's predilection for "cunnilingus," to take two examples. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a drama of "adultery," he tells us. Are widows even in Christianity (I think of the setting of the action as pagan; otherwise the whole ending is meaningless) not allowed to remarry? Perhaps Vance means "fornication," a much less serious sin.

Reality to Vance is for the Trojans to prosecute the war to the bitter end. To Chaucer, who believed that if Troy had won, there would have been no Britain or England, this may not have been a desirable act. Vance even holds the etymology of "chere," a word which Criseyde uses (from Latin *caro*), against her. We have quite a learned Criseyde in Vance's eyes. Furthermore, Vance finds nominalism a completely skeptical philosophy, an interpretation highly disputed today. There are many other detailed criticisms I could make, but this essay is hardly the place to do so. Although I am dubious of how much speech-act theory and semiotics can contribute to the elucidation of most art (although they can certainly do so to life, philosophy, and culture) and although it is the popular thing to find a "gloomy Chaucer,"<sup>4</sup> Vance's article is an acute and brilliant reading of Chaucer's great poem. His linking of the paradigmatic with the lyric or exclamatory mode and the syntagmatic with narrative, his general comments on the centrality of language to an understanding of the poem, on the significance of Troy to the medieval period, on the frequency of certain rhymes (e.g., joy and Troy), on the parallel he sees between Troilus and Criseyde to Troy and Greece and to Being and Fortune, on his awareness of contradictions and oppositions in

the poem, all indicate that this is a major article. But I doubt that we can learn much as to new approaches to medieval literature from his article; rather I fear we shall be misled.

The new approaches to medieval literature in these five articles should stimulate new excitement and a new understanding in the field. Philology and a knowledge of manuscripts must, however, always be the only basis of good scholarship and perception in medieval studies, but there is no need to be concerned *only* with these subjects. Positivism insofar as it stresses respect for fact and text, for accuracy and care, must always have its place in our studies. But we can move beyond such an attitude if we so desire. These articles (and some others which have appeared elsewhere in the past few years) will give us a lead in looking at our materials in a new way: see the rich significance of the movement from oral to written, notice the discontinuities and differences in the Middle Ages and between them and our time, make use of what linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy can provide us with.

Above all, we must keep a sense of polarities and oppositions. We do not necessarily want to find syntheses although at times they may be necessary.<sup>5</sup> We can often best approach the past by being aware of its dualities and polarities. The Christian religion itself provides us with a model of profoundly moving oppositions which to all of us seem to give us a special insight on life. On a lower level we can do the same for the study of the Middle Ages or of any recognizable period. In some ways, however, the Middle Ages is an ideal period for us in the West to approach dialectically. It provides us a basic matrix for our culture. While we do not want all humanistic scholars to be medievalists (where for one thing could they find jobs?), a little dose of it would give an important and deeper perspective on all later literature, history, and culture—as much for its alterity as for its sameness, for its differences as for its similarities. Medieval men are in some important ways ourselves and in other important ways very different from us. A sense of their dilemmas, their solutions, their art, their institutions, their life will help us over our own deep chasms and yet reinforce our sense of the marvelous and the strange.

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#### NOTES

1 On some of the cultural and psychological and symbolic distinctions between “paratactic and hypotactic style,” see Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964), pp. 162–74.



2 I am thinking of Zumthor and Jauss's own earlier works in the late sixties and seventies, and even earlier of such speeches as F. L. Utley's given some years ago at a meeting of the Mediaeval Academy of America, which made a similar point and which urged that we study the Middle Ages not to find its similarities to and the roots of our own age (e.g., the university, the cathedrals, scientific rationality, etc.) but rather its differences from our own period. We should approach the Western Middle Ages as we might approach a different culture in Africa or Australia so that we can see and learn how a society can operate differently from ours and yet have obvious links to modern times. It should be a kind of poor man's anthropology, so to speak. We read of and study the Middle Ages instead of going to spend a year among the Luo or Torres Straits people.

3 See below in my discussion of Vance's article.

4 See M. W. Bloomfield, "The Gloomy Chaucer," in *Veins of Humor*, ed. Harry Levin, Harvard English Studies, 3 (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 57–68.

5 Cf.: "For example, the appearance of dualities, pairs, polarities or opposites does not of itself entail that a mediation is being sought," G. S. Kirk, in a review of Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, in *TLS*, 18 Aug. 1978, p. 922. Cf. also: "in matters of art . . . it is wrong to want to *decide*, to want to *resolve* a difficulty," Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary," *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 9 *et passim*; and Peter Elbow, *Oppositions in Chaucer* (Middletown, Conn., 1975).